

Quidditch Trials

by dracontia

Rose is full of fight, and she's not too bad at strategy, either. But sometimes, it takes an operator to seal the deal. A sequel to 'A Credit to Their Houses,' amid the action of 'Man Behind the Curtain.'

Companion to 'Man Behind the Curtain'

Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: I've heard some people get paid to write fanfiction. I'm not one of them.

"I still think the portrait was taking the mickey," Rose muttered. That didn't stop her from carefully tacking her Snape card to an upright of the Slytherin stands. "Or you are," she said more loudly, to Al.

"It couldn't hurt," Scorpius said. He nibbled at a crumpet, trying to keep butter off his fingers and stop looking green around the gills. He succeeded at neither. Sometimes Rose just wanted to shake him, or at least yell 'Snap out of it!'

Al (mercifully, given that his mouth was full of eggs) said nothing. Rose thought she caught him glancing sideways at the card. He swallowed before remarking, "Take it down, then. It's all one to me."

Rose huffed at him, but left the card where it was. It was difficult to get too angry at the person who showed up with a house-elf laden down with eggs and bangers, among other edibles, just when she thought her stomach was going to eat its way out her back.

"They're coming...get rid of the food," Scorpius said. He pointed to the lockers, where the team captain was directing a handful of prospective team members to bring out brooms, the ball chest, and sundry safety gear. The curious from other Houses who had nothing better to do on a Saturday morning...those who could be arsed to get out of bed...began staking out their places in the stands.

"Bacon first," Al advised. Scorpius sighed at his plate, looking very dubiously at the crispy pile but managing to finish one strip and wash it down with a sip of milk. Al looked pointedly at Rose, then the plate. She wrinkled her nose at him. He shrugged, scoffed the rest, and called for Tinky.

Rose patted her borrowed Cleansweep Moonshadow. Solid without being sluggish, it was as good a Keeper's broom as a Cleansweep of several years' vintage could be. It responded fairly smoothly as she kicked off and glided down from the stands.

She took her place in the row of hopefuls, all of whom were older and taller than she was, most of whom had their own brooms. She recognized the team captain, Bowles, a particularly average-looking Sixth Year who squinted at the parchment in his hands as if reading hurt his eyes. She would never have noticed him in the Common Room, where he spent most of his time either frowning over schoolwork or conferring with the two other Chasers, if Al hadn't pointed him out.

"Rumor is he's got a girlfriend in Hufflepuff," Al whispered in Rose's ear, apropos of nothing. She elbowed him slightly.

"Right. We're looking for a starting Keeper, Seeker, and one starting Beater, and we're taking alternates for all positions," Bowles said with no preamble. "No one's safe on this team, so you want to keep your spot, you fly for it."

Someone scoffed at this. To Rose's relief, it wasn't Al. Admittedly, it was a fair editorial on the likelihood of anyone dislodging the Chasing team of Bowles, Stebbins, and Cahill, who'd been the backbone of Slytherin Quidditch for three years. No one seriously believed that Stebbins would be bumped in his final year, nor that Cahill was in any danger; and the idea that Bowles would hand over his position and by extension give up the captaincy was laughable. Rose always did her homework...especially on the important things (like potential teammates)...and the fact that there was clearly no room for new Chasers only cemented her resolve to try for her dream position.

Bowles merely glowered at the assembled hopefuls and continued. "We're trying Keepers first, with Chaser candidates to assist. Get your gear on, and Keepers to the scoring area."

Rose picked through the available Keeper's gear, trying not to be too dismayed at the large sizes. She managed leg and arm guards well enough, and her hair filled out the helmet. But the chest guard was so long, she considered stuffing the hem under its belts to keep it from flapping over her broom.

"Chaser's gear is over there, Miss," one of the regular Chasers...Cahill, she thought...told her politely enough. "Only Keepers need all this kit."

"It's a good job I'm playing Keeper, then," Rose said. She remembered to keep her tone cool yet courteous. It was a difficult habit, having grown up with such a boisterous family. Slytherin manners generally suited her logical side; too bad her logical side was not what came to the fore when someone challenged her.

Cahill didn't bother to hide his incredulous expression, but all he said was, "Think you may want to check with the captain about that."

Bowles didn't even wait for her to speak. His scowl deepened as soon as he caught sight of Rose geared up. "Who's taking the piss?" he asked.

"No one," Rose answered. "I'm trying for Keeper."

The Captain looked as if he wanted to object. He went so far as to open his mouth.

Out of the blue, Al was at Rose's side. He slung his arm around her shoulder and said, too loudly, "Hey, cousin Rosie! How's the helmet fitting? Ready to smack that Quaffle?"

It was blatant and embarrassing, and Rose would cheerfully have hexed Al, except that mile-wide hint about her family connections shut Bowles' mouth like a spell. He looked from Al's smiling face to Rose's determined one and all he said to Rose was a gruff, "Queue up behind Oakes and Dunstan." Bowles turned to organize the rest of the candidates. Al gave Rose a wink and joined Scorpius and two other potential Seekers.

Rose felt confident after watching Oakes' trial. It was, in a word, dismal. She rather wondered if he'd even seen a Quidditch match before, much less practiced. The captain whistled Time and didn't even bother to address Oakes as he slunk off the pitch.

Dunstan was a marginal improvement, if only because his arms were so bloody long. By sheer dint of flailing, he managed to knock the Quaffle away from the hoops half the time, and even successfully caused Stebbins to shy away from the scoring area with a sudden charge. Rose suspected that move...much like the one where he accidentally knocked the Quaffle **into** the hoop...was more clumsiness than strategy. He was greeted with a shrug from Bowles at the end of his trial, and landed with a confused expression.

"Weasley!" the captain barked. "You're up!"

Rose glided smoothly into the scoring area and expertly steered the broom into position with her knees, igniting envy in the hearts of all First Years who'd had to wait until school for their first flying lesson. She sat up, alert, loose-limbed, in perfect Keeper posture. The morning breeze picked up and she took the direction into account even as she breathed in the Quidditch smells; broom polish, leather, September grass.

Stebbins, veteran of the team, shot into the air as her opponent, with Cahill close behind as his accomplice. They tossed the Quaffle back and forth in mid-pitch, simulating gameplay. Two candidates for Chaser-alternate sailed up after them, providing token obstacles while warming up for their trial.

Then Bowles blew the whistle and the pitch exploded like a box of Uncle George's fireworks.

Stebbins' tells were so obvious she might have accused him of giving her chances on purpose. That one was for the left hoop...

...And it was; but to her shocked dismay, Rose felt it brush past her fingertips.

Cahill recovered it and went through a series of feints which fooled her not at all. She pretended, though, to go for the right hoop, all the while knowing he was aiming...

...dead center. The Quaffle smacked into her hands, and she lobbed it fiercely to one of the prospective back-ups. No celebrating; grandstanding was for amateurs.

It was one of her few successes.

Rose wanted to scream, to cry, with frustration. She *should* be able to do this. She knew the game, knew the position; more than half the time, she could predict where the Quaffle would arrive. Still, time and again...more than half the time...it brushed the tips of her fingers and went in.

Stebbins' tells were truly awful, and Cahill, while better, had a stiff elbow that occasionally betrayed him. But Rose's arms were too short, her body too small to present much of a barrier, even when she resorted to standing on the broom. She'd chosen the best Keeper-style broom in the shed, designed for stability, not speed. It was too late to trade out. It was too late to look for something fast enough to get her to the correct hoop in time, and she wasn't sure it would help. There was a reason all Keepers looked a bit like Dad. There was no question of leaving the scoring area. She knew she didn't have the size to intimidate anyone.

After ten interminable minutes, the captain's whistle blew. "TIME, Weasley."

Rose flew in for the verdict, her heart sinking as her broom lost altitude.

Bowles was already shaking his head. "You've killer instincts, kid, but your arms are too short. Try again next year...assuming your arms grow a foot or better."

It was respectful after a fashion; it was more than Oakes or Dunstan got. Rose couldn't let it go. "I didn't realize I need a faster broom...a Chaser's broom ought to do it. Give me another fifteen, Captain," Rose argued, calm-voiced and reasonable. She thought she did a good job of keeping any tremor or tears out of her voice. She clamped her hands around the broom handle to stop them shaking.

"One try per position," Bowles said dismissively. "There's always next year. Chasers, stay up."

That was it. She'd pinned everything on Slytherin's chronic player shortage, and she still failed. She'd alienated her family, all for nothing. She would NOT cry, not even at the condescending look on the captain's face, nor the disappointed sympathy on Scorpius'.

"Wait. Wait. Hang on, half a mo." Al's voice broke through her misery and turned the captain's head. Rose had to hand it to Al; he could milk the family name for all it was worth. But if he tried to bribe her way on the team, no amount of blood relation could keep her from pounding the life out of him. "What if her arms *were* a foot longer?"

"We can't magically alter player's bodies, you git." This from the senior Chaser, Stebbins. Rose was ninety percent certain he had intended to add a few adjectives to 'git,' but Al's name bought him a considerable measure of courtesy beyond what an average first year could expect.

"Not talking about *literally* lengthening her arms," Al said. Most first years couldn't get away with directing that much scorn at an upper classman, either. "I'm talking about her trying for Beater."

"We go through Beaters like socks," the captain said grimly. "No chance I'm letting a girl try for that, not even for second string. Would've been bad enough having one on the pitch in Keeper's gear."

"We *do* go through Beaters like socks," Cahill argued. "We bloody need all the Beaters we can get, Cap. We don't have the luxury. Besides, since the dead bloke in the Aussie game, everyone's got to wear the damned helmets all the time." There were murmurs from the Stebbins and the surviving Beater that sounded suspiciously like a consensus of 'give 'er a go.'

"Davis catches you mouthing like that, she'll have you transfigured into a cat to lick cauldrons," the captain warned.

"If *Professor* Davis catches you tossing around her surname like that, you'll join him," Al said, so softly it was for Captain Bowles' ears only; Rose just caught it, and perhaps Scorpius may have as well, clinging to Al as he was, like a pale shadow. Rose looked twice to be sure it was Al. There was something different about his voice, aside from the low volume. Something... almost smooth. Insinuating. It was also vaguely familiar, though she couldn't place it.

"Let it be on you, then," Bowles shot at Rose, "If you can play Beater." He pointedly turned away from Al, a slight rusty tinge on his cheeks.

Through all that rapid exchange, Rose's panic mounted. It didn't matter that she wanted to play on the House team very nearly more than life itself. She'd never played Beater. She rarely watched the Beaters. She was going to be a Keeper, like Daddy. She watched the Keeper and the Chasers. Watching the Chasers was all the Keeper had to do. The Seeker could even be safely ignored...it was the Seeker's job to catch the Snitch immediately or to hold off catching it if the score favored the other side above 180. She was small; she lacked the muscular bulk of a professional Seeker. Her mouth began to open, all those protests poised on the tip of her tongue, ready to explain in great detail why she could not play Beater, why it would be madness for her to try, with a few choice arguments explaining why and to what degree Al was a complete nutter.

Until the captain implied that she couldn't.

"Of course I can play Beater," she said, bringing her 'prim' voice into play. She thought it a fair disguise for her grave misgivings.

"Like I said...on you. Don't complain if you leave tryouts on a litter," the captain said curtly. "Dunstan will do for Keeper, and pray we don't need an alternate." He wheeled his broom and started calling up Chasers. The mediocre but exceedingly tall and lanky Dunstan eagerly took his place with the team.

As they watched the low-stakes Chaser-alternate tryouts, Rose hissed to Al, "You bloody well know I've never played Beater! I haven't the bulk for it any more than I have 'Gorilla' Dunstan's arms!"

"I thought you were perfect, Rose," Scorpius offered shyly. "You would've managed with a different broom, maybe."

Maybe. Even Scorpius, Hufflepuff-at-heart that he was, couldn't bring himself to overlook the handicap of Rose's size. She felt her Keeper dreams crumbling away.

"You don't need too much bulk to be a Beater when you've got strategy," Al argued back, keeping his voice low. He'd already moved on to the next campaign. Rose grudgingly acknowledged his leadership skill. "Think about Muggle martial arts. Leverage is more important than size or strength."

Rose thought about it. She could fly hands-free with the best of them; with the bat braced in both hands and a good idea of where the Bludger would end up, the idea wasn't entirely mad. Still...

"All right, I could probably budge the thing. What about getting to it? If I can't get in front of the hoop in time, how am I supposed to fight off two Bludgers anywhere they might fancy showing up on the pitch?"

"Pick one Bludger and follow it?" Scorpius suggested.

"Seekers treat every problem like a Snitch," Rose complained. She tried not to put too much heat into it; Scorpius was only trying to help. Judging from the wounded look on his face, she hadn't succeeded especially well. "I can't fly like a Seeker." She tried to mollify him but couldn't mask her frustration. The prospect of being turned down twice in one day was more than mortal flesh could bear.

"No, but you can fly like a Keeper...except you'll have a powerful broom, not an extra stable one," Al said. He forestalled her argument about not having such a broom by shoving one into her hands.

"Is this James' broom?" she asked suspiciously.

"Add to that a strategy where you defend just one player...say, the Seeker...and you're like a Keeper with extended reach, guarding just one hoop," Al continued, pointedly ignoring her question.

"The 'hoop' moves," Scorpius pointed out.

"Details," Al waved his observation away with a fine gesture.

"You can't make a Beater career out of being a Seeker's bodyguard," Rose argued, but weakly. It was such a tempting idea. She could almost see it working.

"Why not? Some professional teams play that way. One Beater focuses on defending the Seeker while the other mainly tries to do damage to the opposing team. The Chasers look out for each other and don't need quite as much protection as the Seeker, who can't afford to focus on anything but the Snitch and the score. And the Keeper is traditionally undefended, since there's not too much difference between dodging and deflecting," Al reasoned, and it was damnably plausible.

The whistle blew again. "Beaters, you're up. Rankin re-trying, Kent, and... Weasley...and Oakes? Again? Right, two trials then," Bowles said, sounding less than patient. "Rankin and Oakes first."

Rose watched Rankin like a hawk. He seemed to know his business. He was a classic Beater...strong, squat, and seeming to especially relish smashing the Bludger towards the target labeled 'Seeker.' As she watched, she noticed that he seemed to almost draw the Bludger, waiting for its inherent tendency to chase players to kick in so he could launch it at a target.

There was nothing to learn from Oakes. Even normally tactful Scorpius, curiously echoing her earlier thoughts, asked, "Has he ever seen Quidditch played?"

Still, Oakes was big; when he occasionally connected, the Bludger screamed into the far reaches of the clouds. Rose couldn't help muttering about it under her breath.

"He'd be great if the clouds were on the other team," Al said dismissively. Bowles whistled time.

Rose was up like a shot, with Kent following more slowly. The huge boy squinted at her and snorted. She ignored him completely in favor of wrapping her fingers more tightly around the bat.

And then the Bludgers were whistling through the air.

This was where not having played Beater before showed. She ducked the first Bludger without even swinging, and dodged the second with a swing that failed to connect.

Someone (and if she ever identified the voice, its owner was in trouble) yelled, "You're supposed to hit it!" Rose gritted her teeth and wheeled her broom.

She wasn't just going to hit that damned Bludger. She was going to **murder** it.

The next time a Bludger headed her way, she didn't wait; she flew into it. The *crack* of the bat was satisfying, even if making contact jarred her to her back teeth. The iron ball canted off towards the stands in a random sort of way. Rose narrowed her eyes at it. Now she knew how it was done; she just needed to work on aim. Her lips curled in a feral grin as she spun to smack a Bludger that came whooshing up behind her, and stretched low on her broom to chase the second Bludger again. This was definitely James' broom, a Chaser's broom all the way; fast and flexible, and she made it work for her by flying to meet the Bludger. Al had been right, little as she care to admit it. Her arms alone weren't strong enough to take on a Bludger whilst seated on a rock-solid Moonshadow, but her arms and the roaring power of a Firebolt X-Factor could. When the whistle blew, she was almost disappointed it was over.

Bowles was looking between Rose and Kent with an expression that suggested he was trying to find a safe Bertie Bott's Bean. Rose tilted her bat into the rack and returned to the bench, striving to keep her cool. It had felt right... but had she been good enough?

Scorpius was reassuring on that score. "You were brilliant!" he whispered. Rose forgave his buttery breath.

"How was Kent?" she asked.

"A solid flyer, but his aim isn't much better than Oakes. He doesn't handle the bat especially well. I think he actually kicked the Bludger once," Al said.

"Seekers!" Bowles shouted. "Potter, Pitkin, Malfoy, Snodgrass, in that order."

Al snatched the broom from Rose's hands. "Thanks for keeping it warm for me, cousin," he said with a wink. He kicked into a single-barrel-roll takeoff and a long, elegant, banking turn, skimming the edges of the stands in a textbook Seeker's search pattern. The wind was quite stiff now, and his hair whipped about like a crup shaking a lawn gnome. It was clear the instant he spotted the Snitch; he pivoted like a compass needle and shot off, faster than the lone Bludger sent to keep him on his toes.

Rose gave an internal huff. True, Al had mad flying skills; a hunting falcon wasn't a patch on him. But the bloody grandstander couldn't help adding a flourish, here, there...everywhere. The way he moved, you couldn't help but imagine a green cape rippling behind him...and you couldn't realize that he'd caught the snitch until he plummeted like a falcon, practically into Bowles' lap, with the little gold wings fluttering in his fist.

Cahill whistled. "Kid's got style."

Well, all right... that could be one word for it.

"Not bad." The Captain grunted noncommittally.

"Your cousin's in," Cahill whispered to Rose. "That was practically a declaration of undying admiration."

That may have been, but Bowles took the Snitch back and called Pitkin, giving at least the appearance of a man who hadn't yet made up his mind.

Rose rather felt sorry for Pitkin. He had the same problem as she did; the wrong build for a position he'd clearly mastered strategically. At first he couldn't build enough speed. Then, he couldn't maneuver quite well enough at speed. He finally caught the Snitch...but not before Bowles had already whistled him in.

"He's a third year... still plenty of time for him to replace Bowles as star Chaser," Al remarked.

"Thinking of starting your own team?" Rose scoffed at him. Al merely smirked. He wore the expression disturbingly well, and even Snodgrass' more credible performance didn't budge it.

It was finally Scorpius' turn. "One and two, mate," Rose could hear Al whisper in his ear as he handed over James' broom. Rose settled for giving Scorpius a nod and smile. Scorpius' eyes brightened and he smiled back, that same sweet little half-smile that got Al out of so much trouble. Somehow, Scorpius wore it much better.

Scorpius didn't fly like a bird of prey. He kicked off the ground like...well, like an 11-year-old boy. But he shot into the sky with such determination that Rose imagined, if she could see his eyes, they would be steel and not silver. The wind buffeted him, and if he'd had a lesser broom, a school broom, his featherweight frame likely would have been blown clean off the pitch. He zigged, zagged, yawed, dove, and hovered, every fiber taut, practically vibrating with intensity, much like the Snitch itself...until suddenly, there it was in his hand.

"And that's why he's the Snidget," Al crowed.

It's as if he's Scorpius' manager, not his rival for the Seeker position, Rose thought. She was irrationally irritated at Al and irritated even more because she knew she was being irrational. Scorpius was a nice chap and all, but really, Al ought to save that level of loyalty for family. At least, that was what she told herself, then immediately chastised herself for lying.

Maybe it was just that she found that silly nickname irksome. *Snidget, indeed.*

All she said, however, was, "If James ever finds out you loaned his broom to Scorpius to try out for Slytherin Quidditch, don't bother going home for Christmas." Al said nothing, but his smirk broadened into a grin.

"That was ugly as arse, but damned effective," Cahill remarked. Bowles tilted his head and 'hmed.' Profanity notwithstanding, Rose hoped that Bowles delegated any pre-game pep talks to Cahill.

"What did you think?" Scorpius rushed to ask Rose. For long moments she couldn't answer, for if Scorpius' flying was ugly, Scorpius himself, after flying, was another matter altogether. His eyes were bright, his normally pale cheeks pink with exertion, and his hair was a wild halo about his head, rivalling Al's most windblown excesses. He looked practically angelic.

"Highly effective," Rose finally said. She instantly hated herself for borrowing from Cahill, but Scorpius, oblivious to her plagiarism, beamed at her. And wasn't *that* a Bludger to the brain, given he was already almost too pretty to be a boy..! Rose felt her mind seize, and was painfully grateful for Al's back-slapping interruption, lest she do something not merely irrational, but utterly barking...like trying to stroke Scorpius' hair back into place.

"Brilliant stuff, Snidge," Al said. "It'll be an honor being your second." Scorpius just ducked his head shyly and returned the broom to Al with stammered thanks.

Rose suddenly spared a thought for her Chocolate Frog Card, perched in the Slytherin stands. She hoped it had survived the wind. She hoped her name was on that bit of Parchment Bowles was scribbling and muttering over.

Now the balls were back in the chest and Bowles was calling everyone to attention. "Right, final roster... Chasers, returning: Stebbins, Cahill, Bowles. Alternates: Gould and Michaels. Beaters...returning: Oakes, starting, Kent."

Kent. All that, for nothing. Two trials, two failures. Al had acted a git, she'd flown her heart out, all for...

"Alternate: Weasley."

Oh. Well... it was better than nothing, she supposed.

Then Scorpius looked at her with a smile like all outdoors in the summer hols, and she couldn't help thinking it was a little bit brilliant.

Bowles droned on. "Keeper: Dunstan. Seeker: Potter. Alternate: Malfoy. If you're on the list, gather up the brooms and gear and stow 'em. Everyone else, try again next year."

Rose trudged off with a handful of helmets and her borrowed Moonshadow. She tried not to hold a grudge against the school broom. After that token assist, she headed for her not-so-lucky card, muttering to herself.

"So much for lu..." she stopped short. The green bunting on the stands had flapped in the breeze and caught on the railing...covering her Snape card. Her lips twisted. She yanked the card down and briefly toyed with the idea of testing her Banishing spells on it, or simply tossing it into the wind.

She heard Scorpius making his way up behind her, panting a little. "Do you think it helped?" he asked. "I mean, you've never played Beater before today, and you *aced* it!"

She had been pretty good for a first try. Still... "I don't think the card did anything. It was all me," Rose said.

"If Cap wasn't so stuck on an all-giant roster, you'd be first string," Al added, cruising up behind on his borrowed broom. He gestured behind him, and Scorpius hopped on gratefully.

Rose reconsidered trying out Evanesco or Incendio on the card. Not that it would have been lucky, even if the picture hadn't been covered; it was just silly to get rid of a rare Chocolate Frog Card in a fit of temper. She tucked it in her pocket. "We make our own luck."

"I've heard that, somewhere," Al said.

Rose put her hands on her hips. "Oh, belt it, and budge up on that broom. You *are* giving it back to James," she said. She crammed in behind Scorpius. She'd meant to simply sit, but Al decided to do his best impression of a Wronski Feint on the way down, and she found herself clamping her arms around Scorpius' slender middle to keep from pitching into the void between the stands.

When she located her stomach, they were back on the ground. Scorpius was pink in the face again and Al was nowhere to be found, presumably returning his ill-gotten broom. She knew Scorpius was saying *something*, but she couldn't wrap her mind around it. The memory of his silky hair whipping against her cheek and the buttery, broom-polish-and-boy scent of him was too distracting. She just nodded, relieved that it seemed to be the right response when he gave one of his little half-smiles.

Of course, she wasn't quite so relieved when she realized that she'd just agreed to go visit Hagrid's new Hippogriff hatchling...

Boys.

Honestly, Quidditch was much less trouble.

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